

The Monastic Grades

When one desiring the monastic life enters a monastery, he normally passes through three steps or stages: 1) Probationer (Novice including Riasaphor), 2) Monk of the Lesser Schema (Cross-bearer or Stavrophore), and 3) Monk of the Great Schema (Russian Skhimnik). The Probationer who enters a monastery desires to do so in order to acquit himself worthily in the angelic state, so called because Monks renounce all worldly things, do not marry, do not acquire and hold property, and live as do the Angels in Heaven, glorifying God night and day and striving to do His Will in all things.

The first act of anyone who desires to perform any strenuous task is that of preparation. If, for example, one is an athlete, he would train and condition himself physically and mentally, so as to better perform in the chosen event. If one wishes to be a doctor or a lawyer or a businessman or whatever, he first prepares himself with the proper education, apprenticeship training under the skilled guidance of one more experienced, and so on. A soldier first spends time in Boot Camp, being trained physically and mentally to be a good soldier. And so, in like manner, he who wishes to be a Monk must prepare himself for the task at hand, thus entering as a Probationer (or Novice).

For a period of at least three years, the Novice must train himself under the guidance of one skilled in the monastic life and the direction of souls, by immersing himself in the life of the Monastery, struggling to perform the obediences given to him and preparing himself physically (through his labors, fasting, vigils, etc.) and spiritually (through his rule of prayer and obedience to an elder), for the monastic life. This three-year period of preparation has existed from the earliest times, for, in the Life of St. Pachomius, the founder of the Common Life, we learn that he was commanded by an angel: Do not admit anyone to the performance of higher feats until three years have passed.... Let him enter this domain only when he has accomplished some hard work.

Traditionally, a Novice, after spending a short time in lay clothing, is vested in part of the monastic habit, that is, the Inner Riasa and the Skouphos (or monastic cap). The Inner Riasa is simply a narrow-sleeved robe reaching to the ankles (Podriznik in Russian) and the Skouphos is a cup-shaped cap common to all Orthodox clerics and monastics. These garments are always black in color (as are all the monastic garments), signifying penitence and deadness to the ways of the world.

Riasaphor.

After one has been a Novice for a while, he could take the next step, which is that of Riasaphor Monk, who, it must be noted, is still considered to be a Novice, but in a special sense. He does not make solemn vows, as do the Monks of the Lesser and Greater Schemas, but he is still considered to be, although imperfect, a true Monk. He cannot marry, he cannot leave the Monastery without censure, and if he were to leave and marry, he would be subject to excommunication. Nonetheless, he is still a Novice.

The Order of the Riasa is usually performed after one of the canonical Hours. Standing before the Abbot, the candidate is tonsured (hair cut in a cross-wise form) in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, signifying that he casts from himself all idle thoughts and acts, and takes upon himself the yoke of the Lord. The Abbot then vests him with the Outer Riasa (a wide-sleeved outer robe) and Kamilavka (a flat-topped hat).

In ancient times the Riasa was worn on days of mourning and it signifies to the Novice that he must grieve for his sins. The Kamilavka (cap protecting from the heat) signifies to the Novice that he must tame the heat of the passions. Henceforth the Novice is called Riasaphor (Wearer of the Robe), but, as noted, no vows have been made. [In our times, the Riasaphor Monk is also allowed the monastic veil with the Kamilavka, as is worn by the Monks of the Lesser and Greater Schemas.]

He who has attained the dignity of Riasaphor is under no obligation to advance further in the monastic grades, and many do not of their own choice, but neither is the Novice obligated to advance to the dignity of Riasaphor prior to making solemn vows and attaining to the next step in monasticism, which is that of the Lesser Schema (habit, dignity, or aspect).

Order of the Lesser Schema.

Originally in monasticism there were only two grades: Probationer and Monk of the Angelic Habit (or Great Schema). Thus we can say that for every Monk the most desired feat of the soul the feat of attaining perfection is the taking of the Great Schema. Since ancient times Monks have spoken of the Great Schema as the

culmination of Monkhood, wherein the Monk loves God with a perfect love in accordance with the Gospel command, with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind (Matt. 22:37). In time the Lesser Schema became a kind a preparatory step to the Great Schema. The Common Life (that of a Monk of the Lesser Schema) came to be known as betrothal, and Seclusion (the life of a Monk of the Great Schema) within a Monastery as actual matrimony.

The Tonsure.

The main feature of the Order of the Lesser Schema is the Tonsure and the making of solemn vows. The Monastic Tonsure (or Profession) can be seen as the mystical marriage of the soul with the Heavenly Bridegroom, but it also can be seen as a second Baptism, inasmuch as the very ceremony parallels the actual Baptism ceremony. The candidate for the Monastic Tonsure comes as a penitent, as though to Baptism. [In the original Greek of the rite, the candidate is referred to as a catechumen, and he fulfils, in a sense, a catechumenate prior to the Monastic Tonsure in his three-year probation.]

The candidate stands unclothed in the Narthex of the church as though about to be baptized by immersion, signifying that the Old Man is being put off and the New Man put on. Vows are made, as at Baptism, similar to the Baptismal vows of renunciation, faith and obedience to the end of life, and these are given in response to specific questions, as at Baptism. A new name is given, as at Baptism, and the hair is shorn in the tonsure, just as at Baptism. The new monastic is given a cross, just as a cross is placed around the neck of the newly-baptized, and he is also given a lighted candle to hold, just as is the newly-baptized.

Thus, it is obvious that the resemblance of the Monastic Tonsure to Baptism is not accidental; indeed, in the instructions given to the monastic Catechumen in the Order of the Great Schema (with parallels in the Order of the Lesser Schema), the following words are said: A second Baptism you are receiving...and you shall be cleansed from your sins.

We can also see in the Monastic Tonsure the mystical re-enactment of the return of the Prodigal Son to his father's house, for, at first, he stands at a distance from his father's house (in the Narthex the entrance to the Sanctuary) as a penitent, having abandoned the world after drinking the cup of its deceitful delights. He is seen from afar (as the Prodigal was by his father), for the Monks come to greet him and escort him to the gates of the Altar where his father (the Abbot) awaits him.

In the Order of the Lesser Schema, as noted above, the Novice stands unclothed and unshod in the Narthex, wearing only a sort of shirt (in ancient times a hair shirt), waiting, as a penitent, to be conducted into his father's house.' As he is conducted to the Abbot, the Novice performs three prostrations on the way, and then stops before the Holy Doors where the Abbot is waiting. Before him stands a lectern upon which are laid a Cross and a Testament.

The Abbot then asks him what he seeks in coming here. The reply is given, I seek a life of mortification. The Abbot then questions him further as to whether he aspires to the angelic estate, whether he gives himself to God of his own will, whether he intends to abide in the Monastery and lead a life of mortification until his last breath, whether he intends to keep himself in virginity, chastity, and piety, whether he will remain obedient to the Superior and to the brethren even unto death, and whether he will endure willingly the restraints and hardships of the monastic life. When he has answered all these questions, Yes, Reverend Father, with the help of God, the Abbot then exhorts him as to the nature of the monastic life and the Novice pledges himself to keep his vows, which were included in the Order of Monastic Profession by St. Basil the Great.

Then, in order to test his willingness, the Abbot hands the scissors, with which the Tonsure is to be effected, three times to the Novice, asking him each time to take these scissors and give them to me. Each time the Novice takes the scissors and hands them back to the Abbot, kissing his hand. Then the Abbot tonsures the Novice's head in the form of a cross, saying, Our brother N. is tonsured by the cutting of the hairs of his head in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in doing so changes the Novice's name for another, in token of complete renunciation of the world and perfect self-consecration to God. Indeed, the first act of obedience of the new Monk is his acceptance of the new name given him.

The Monastic Habit.

At the completion of the Tonsure itself, the new Monk is now vested in the Monastic Habit. He is given to wear a square of cloth, called the Paraman (something added to the mantiya) upon which are represented the Cross of Christ with the lance, reed and sponge, and the inscription, I bear on my body the wounds of the Lord. This is

fastened about the shoulders and waist by means of strings or cords sewn to the corners, and serves to remind the new Monk that he has taken on himself the yoke of Christ and must control his passions and desires. At the same time a Cross is hung on his neck (often fastened to the same cords with which the Paraman is bound), signifying that he is to follow Christ.

Then the Monk is given the Inner Riasa, which is the same as that worn by Probationers. A leather belt, made of the skin of a dead animal signifying deadness to the world is fastened about his loins. This girding of the loins also signifies bodily mortification and readiness for the service of Christ and His return (Luke 12:35-37).

Next, the Monk is given the Mantiya (mantle or cloak), a long, sleeveless robe, also called the robe of incorruption and purity, the absence of sleeves signifying the restraining of worldly pursuits. Upon his head the Monk is given the Kamilavka with veil (called, in Russian, klobuk), or the helmet of salvation. The veil signifies that the Monk must veil his face from temptation and guard his eyes and ears against all vanity. The wings of the veil date from the time of St. Methodius (846), Patriarch of Constantinople, who was wounded in the face during the reign of the iconoclast Emperor Theophilus. In order to conceal his wounds, the Saint wore wings with his veil and fastened them about his lower face. And so, the wings of the veil have been in use since that time in memory of the sufferings of the Saint. Finally the Monk is given sandals for his feet.

After the vesting, the Monk is given a Prayer Rope (chotki in Russian) with many knots, to count prayers and prostrations by. This Prayer Rope is the Monk's spiritual sword, helping him to conquer absent-mindedness while at prayer and to drive away evil thoughts from his soul. Then he is given a hand cross as the shield of faith, with which to put out the flaming darts of the Evil One. Finally, he is given a lighted candle, signifying that he must strive, by purity of life, by good deeds, and good demeanor to be a Light to the World.

At the conclusion of this, the Great Litany is recited by the Deacon with the addition of special petitions on behalf of the new Monk. The hymn, As many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ, is sung as at the Baptism, and then Epistle and Gospel readings, reminding the new Monk that he must wage war against the enemies of salvation and how love of God must be greater than love of parents, etc. At the conclusion of the Rite, the Kiss of Peace is exchanged by the new Monk and the other brethren of the Monastery.

Order of the Great Schema.

As noted earlier, the ultimate goal of a Monk is the Order of the Great Schema (or Angelic Habit). One who aspired to that dignity usually struggled for many years in the monastic life and often it was not conferred until the end of a Monk's life. Those who reached that state usually spent the rest of their lives in complete seclusion and silence within the Monastery or a specially-prepared Skete or Hermitage, where laymen could not enter even to pray.

It should be noted, however, that not all the fathers and ascetics of the Church divided monasticism into Greater and Lesser Schema. For example, St. Theodore of Studium (826) disagreed with this practice, since he considered that as there was only one Sacrament of Baptism, likewise there should be only one form of monasticism. The practice, however, became widespread, although, in Athonite Greek monasteries, for example, the practice of St. Theodore is generally adhered to.

The Order of the Great Schema differs from that of the Lesser Schema in the following particulars: 1) the monastic vestments are laid on the Holy Table the night before, signifying that the candidate receives them from the Lord Himself; 2) the name of the Monk is again changed; 3) instead of the Paraman, the Monk of the Great Schema receives a garment called the Analavos (to take up in Russian Analav), or the mystical Cross which the Monk is to take up daily in imitation of Christ. This is worn around the neck and reaches to the ankles at the end. Upon it is depicted the Cross of Christ, together with the spear, reed and sponge, as well as the skull and crossbones. Like the Paraman, the Analav is made from the skin of a dead animal and for the same reason; 4) instead of a Kamilavka with veil, the Monk of the Great Schema is given a pointed hat and veil called Koukoulion or Cowl (often called a Cowl of Guilelessness), upon which are depicted five crosses one on the forehead, one on the back between the shoulders, one on the back further down, and one each on the ends of the wings of the veil.

Nuns.

In conclusion, we must make note that in Orthodoxy monasticism embraces both men and women. The general rules for the organization of monastic life, the Monastic Grades, Tonsure, Habit, etc., are the same for all monastics, and the goals and aspirations of monastic life likewise are the same for both men and women.

Customarily, female monastics are styled Nuns and their monasteries Convents, and as the Monks are addressed as Brother or Father, so too, the Nuns are addressed as Sister or Mother. The Superior of a Convent is entitled Abbess (Igumena in Russian; in Greek Hegumenissa). Nonetheless, although sequestered in separate monasteries, each isolated from the opposite sex, all Orthodox monastics, Monks and Nuns alike, are united in a common quest for the Angelic State.

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